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Promotion Needed to Give Motive in Civil Service

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IT is a far cry from Maeterlinck's poetic drama, *The Bluebird*, to anything so prosaic as a government office; yet the blind quest of Tyltyl and Mytyl in the play is typical of the unseeing policy of the United States government in going out into the highways and byways, often the political highways and byways, for its supervisory civil officers, overlooking subordinates with years of experience in the branches of the service in which the appointments are made, who might be promoted to the higher positions with profit to taxpayers.

Can the duties of a collector of customs, a collector of internal revenue, or a register of a land office, for example, be learned in a better place than in a custom-house, an internal revenue office, or a land office? They cannot.

THE GOVERNMENT STAFF

The largest single employer of men and women in this country is the United States government. The executive civil service of the United States now employs approximately 650,000 workers, or one in 166 of our entire population, including the insular possessions, or one in 73 of all residents on American soil anywhere, ten years of age or over, engaged in gainful occupations. These calculations are based on recent estimates of the Bureau of the Census in anticipation of the results of the fourteenth general census.

Quite 100,000 of the 650,000 federal civil servants, however, receive small compensation, or none at all, from the government. About 42,000 are postmasters at fourth-class offices, whose

pay averages about \$300 or \$400 a year. Each of these is required to have a designated assistant, to act in case of the absence of the postmaster. The assistant at a fourth-class post office usually is a member of the family or an employee of the postmaster and receives no compensation from the government. Several thousand other federal civil employees receive small salaries for part-time work.

The largest single branch is the Post Office Department with nearly 300,000 employees. The War Department has more than 125,000 civilian employees, the Navy Department about 90,000, and the Treasury Department about 60,000. No other branch has as many as 25,000 employees.

At the height of the war expansion about 850,000 civilians were employed in the federal executive service. Further reductions are to be expected, but it is certain that the pre-war figure of less than 500,000 never again will be reached.

No one knows just how much money the government pays out annually in salaries. If the average compensation is \$1,100, the federal civil payroll now amounts to more than \$700,000,000 annually. It is estimated that the average salary earned by federal employees in the District of Columbia in 1919 was about \$1,320. The general average is placed at \$1,100, a figure probably too low, because of the large number of low-salaried or non-salaried positions in branches outside the District of Columbia.

Any institution that employs one in 73 of all our workers and calls for

the expenditure of such a large part of our annual revenues is entitled to the most serious consideration.

GOVERNMENT EMPLOYMENT METHODS

The employment methods of the government could be improved. Under the civil service law of 1883 a good system of competitive examinations and appointments on merit has been built up for the classes of positions covered by the law. But beyond certification by the Civil Service Commission for appointment of those applicants who are proved by examination to be eligible, the merit system is not fully operative even in connection with the positions to which it applies. Haphazard practices in assignments of work and in promotions, over which no central authority has jurisdiction, have brought about inequalities which are discouraging to the workers. This condition and the relatively low salaries paid by the government cause a "turnover" in government forces that could not long be withstood by a private business.

The readjustment of government salaries in the District of Columbia has recently received the attention of the Joint Commission on Reclassification of Salaries, which was authorized by a provision in the legislative, executive and judicial appropriation act approved March 1, 1919. The report of this commission is now in the hands of Congress and its fate remains to be seen. The report represents many months of hard work and an earnest effort to present data which will enable Congress to understand conditions as they exist. If the results of this careful investigation prove satisfactory it is expected that the inquiry will be extended to the branches outside the District of Columbia, in which six-sevenths of the force, or about 550,000 workers, are employed.

In all plans for the betterment of the civil service, however, there seems to be a failure to recognize the anomaly presented by our administrative system of filling certain inferior positions through the test of merit under the civil service law, and excluding from the scheme great numbers of the higher offices, which should stand as a reward for meritorious service, but which in fact are often held as payment for service to the political party in power. Here the government fails to take advantage of an opportunity to add materially to the strength and efficiency of the civil service. This failure and the lack of uniform regulations for promotions on merit under competent supervision form a weak part of the government employment plan. The effect of practices so lacking in the essentials of good administration is not on the worker alone; the institution is the great sufferer. No lengthy argument should be needed to convince any intelligent person that the prospect of advancement through merit to the supervisory offices would tend to improve the quality of applicants for government employment.

SCOPE OF CIVIL SERVICE LAW

The present civil service law was enacted to correct the evils of the "spoils system," which had become intolerable. That the plan provided by the law, that of appointments through competitive examinations for certain positions, has been a vast improvement over the old patronage method is generally conceded; but the law failed to be a completely effective instrument by not providing for the application of the merit system to the more responsible and, therefore, the more remunerative positions.

The law specifies that positions requiring mere unskilled laborers and those which are filled through nomi-

nation by the President for the confirmation of the Senate are not to be classified thereunder. Most of the higher supervisory positions in the civil service come within this latter class.

The administrative offices, aside from the Cabinet, which do not come within the scope of the civil service law, are postmasters at offices of the first, second and third classes, collectors of internal revenue, collectors of customs; registers, receivers, and surveyors general of the land office; assistant treasurers; surveyors, special examiners, appraisers and naval officers in the customs service; superintendents of mints, assayers in mints, supervising inspectors in the steamboat inspection service, commissioners of immigration and naturalization, assistant secretaries and heads of bureaus of the departments at Washington, etc.—about 13,000 positions in all. Some of these pay salaries as high as \$12,000 a year.

RECENT IMPROVEMENTS

That some presidents of recent years have believed that the service can be improved by the extension of the merit system is evidenced by the regulations promulgated by President Roosevelt in 1906 and by President Taft in 1909. These regulations provide for filling positions in the consular and diplomatic services (not ambassadors and ministers), and making promotions in those services, through competitive examinations, and an executive order issued by President Wilson on March 31, 1917, which requires that positions of postmaster at offices of the first, second, and third classes shall be filled in the same manner. The procedure of submitting nominations to the Senate for its confirmation is not discontinued, for it is required by law, but the selection of the nominees for

these positions is made through competitive examination. The machinery of the Civil Service Commission is being successfully used by the President to test the qualifications of applicants for positions of postmaster at first, second and third class offices, and the commission assists the State Department in the examinations of applicants for the diplomatic and consular services.

These executive orders were important steps in the right direction. In the case of postmasters, the order would have been a seven-league step if it had provided for a system of promotions, rather than one of appointments of men untrained in postal business, albeit the order removes postmaster positions from politics. In recent years there has also been some tendency to re-appoint, after a four-year tenure, an official who has proved worthy. In comparatively few cases, however, have the important offices been filled by promotion from the ranks. Indeed, employees of the government who hold their positions as the result of competitive civil service examinations are reluctant to accept appointments outside the operation of the civil service law, for with a change of administration the application of the patronage system is likely to deprive them of the fruits of years of effort. George B. Cortelyou and Frank H. Hitchcock were conspicuous exceptions. Both of these men rose to Cabinet offices from positions in the classified civil service.

WASTEFUL METHODS

The tendency of the government to emulate the children in the play is most wasteful. At best, the proper training of an administrative officer of the government up to the point where he may have a vigorous grasp and accurate knowledge of his duties is very

costly. Under the present system, however, the chief often enjoys a sinecure, his principal subordinate being the real executive. The chief's salary is a total loss to taxpayers. The time consumed by the President in considering candidates and by the Senate in debating the suitability of nominees is not to be overlooked. That large numbers of positions of this class are still linked with politics is a serious handicap all around. The relinquishment of patronage privileges would be of distinct advantage even to those who seem to regard them as a valuable possession, for a political appointment usually results in a number of disgruntled candidates and one ingrate.

It would be no less sensible for a private corporation to conduct its affairs with a view to political rather than business reasons than for the government to do so. The vital difference between the business of a private corporation and that of the government, however, is that if at the end of a fiscal year the corporation finds itself facing a deficit it cannot call upon the citizens of the country to meet it through a tax levy. The ability to do this makes it possible for the government to transact its business in a most unbusiness-like way. How long will the accepted notion prevail that in administering government affairs practical experience in government business is superfluous? When will taxpayers awaken to a realization of the fact that efficiency in government administration means a saving of government funds?

It may be argued that the government service differs from a private corporation in that it does not aim at profits, but surely it should aim at the efficiency which in private enterprise insures profits.

TRAINING FOR GOVERNMENT OFFICES

There is today no such profession or career as that of trained postmaster, collector of customs, collector of internal revenue, or the like. Why should there not be? Is the Post Office Department, for example, anything but a large business institution whose sole object is to collect, transport and distribute the mail satisfactorily at the lowest possible rates? Why should there not be a profession of postmaster which might be learned by schooling in the post-office business just as there is a profession of freight traffic manager which is learned by schooling in the railroad business? When a vacancy occurs in the position of postmaster at Canastota, New York, paying a salary of \$2,400 a year, why should it not be filled by the promotion of a postal employee who has demonstrated his ability in the post-office business by his work in the organization? When a vacancy occurs in the position of postmaster at Portland, Maine, a \$4,000 office, why should it not be filled by the advancement of a postmaster at a smaller office who has proved himself worthy of promotion?

To carry the system to a logical conclusion, when a vacancy occurs in the position of postmaster at New York City, which office pays \$8,000 a year, why should it not be filled by the transfer of a postmaster at a \$6,000 office, such as Pittsburgh, Washington, Buffalo or Cleveland? The public is so wedded to the idea that the office of postmaster in a particular city rightfully belongs to a member of that community that it is probably not ready to receive kindly a change so radical, but if it can be demonstrated that better postal service will result from an alteration of methods in the appointment of postmasters, the change would doubtless be acceptable.

What has been said of the postal

service applies with equal force to the customs service, the internal revenue service, or any other branch of the government, for each of these departments is naught but a big business enterprise to which business principles can and should be applied.

POLICY-FORMING OFFICIALS

It is conceded that the President has the right to select for members of his Cabinet men who are in every way in sympathy with his own policies; possibly a few offices require men with training and experience not obtainable in government establishments. It is further conceded that it would be a mistake to fill all supervisory offices through promotion, for the occasional infusion of new blood of the right kind from the outside would bring into the government service new ideas from private business and would tend to promote the spirit of competition that is so essential to the success of any large organization. However, it is maintained that the federal civil service would be improved from the top to the bottom if promotion of worthy subordinates were the rule rather than the exception.

A recent writer, a member of Congress, in a popular magazine stated as his opinion that "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" would be an appropriate legend for the portals of all government office buildings. In his view a young man or woman who

enters the civil service of the United States flings away ambition at the start and is certain to prove a failure. The writer states that the government service offers little incentive to initiative in that it fails to reward merit with promotion, but rather makes advancements through personal favoritism or "outside" influence; that it is lacking in the spirit of competition which makes for endeavor, and is altogether devoid of the elements which tend to develop self-reliance, healthy ambition and efficient service.

The situation is hardly as bad as that but it is bad enough. It is far from being hopeless and just as far from being all that could be desired. Those who seek to amass wealth will find little opportunity for doing so in work for the government, but the civil service has much to commend it. It offers a wide field of opportunity where individual tastes may be developed and where real constructive work—big, interesting, clean work—may be done. Perhaps this explains why so many capable men and women spend their lives in the service of the government under conditions as they exist today.

The member of Congress who recommended Dante's doleful warning for a door-plate pointed an accusing finger at himself and his fellow-legislators, for the remedies for the ills of the civil service are in the hands of Congress.